



Business

TAKING OLIVE OIL PRODUCTION TO NEW HEIGHTS

By **Reed Fujii**
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As president of Corto Olive, Brady Whitlow is among the leaders of a pioneering effort to develop commercial-scale olive-oil production in California.

The trouble with being a pioneer, however, is having to navigate territory with few if any signposts pointing the best ways to go.

"Nobody in this country knows much about olive oil on a large scale," he said. "There aren't many resources. When we find resources, I find them in Spain and Italy."

That's why Corto Olive, northwest of Stockton, along with Musco Family Olive Co. of Tracy are among a number of private companies and industry groups supporting establishment of a new research and educational center at University of California, Davis.

Part of the university's Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science, the UC Davis Olive Center will focus on strengthening California's olive oil labeling statutes, researching issues facing olive-oil and table-olive producers, and identifying better methods for detecting adulterated oil. Eventually it will also offer classes on olive cultivation, olive oil and olive processing and provide student internships.

The university is noted for research that helped underpin the growth of the California wine industry and innovation, such as development of mechanical tomato harvesters.

"UC Davis really made a mark with grapes and wine and we want to do the same with olives and olive oil," said Dan Flynn, executive director of the new center.

Planting olive trees in high-density rows and pruning them for mechanical harvest, innovations from Europe, have come to California with companies such as Corto Olive and California Olive Ranch, another center supporter, leading the way.

As a result, Flynn said, "The olive-oil sector is taking off in a manner that has not been seen before in California. The volume of oil will increase by 500 percent in the next five years."

To hit those numbers, Whitlow said he's looking for some help from the university that's "been a great resource for growers in California for 100 years."

"We can't do it all by ourselves," he said. "Our goal is to build an industry. If we're trying to stand alone on an island, we wouldn't get much done."

Flynn said the UC research will also help the increasing numbers of small, boutique olive oil producers who craft flavorful oils of the highest quality.

"The research that we do here will have applicability to producers large and small," he said. One example would be to find better ways to combat the olive fruit fly, a pest that can wipe out crops if not controlled.

Also, he said, "There's a need to conform olive oil labeling laws to the international standards for different grades of olive oil and we're providing technical assistance to the California Olive Oil Council that would do just that."

There are benefits, too, for California's long-time table olive industry, said Felix Musco, president of Musco Family Olive Co.

"We're genuinely very excited," he said. "There's some very interesting innovations that could bring the California industry to a whole new level."

Those include orchard planting and mechanical harvesting to improve production efficiencies, research to identify and improve the health benefits of olives and olive oil, and improvements in processing.

"I expect UC Davis to be in the forefront of turning our industry into a really profitable one, all the way from the grower to the processor," Musco said.

The center has been established with a combined \$75,000 in seed funding from the campus's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the Office of Research. Startup funds totaling \$25,000 also have been provided by Corto Olive, Musco Family Olive Co., as well as Bell-Carter Foods, California Olive Oil Council and California Olive Ranch.

An olive oil processing plant will be placed in the new Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science complex, now under construction and set for completion in June. The Olive Center plans to begin processing olive oil with the equipment this fall 2008.

Eventually, Flynn looks to develop an organic olive orchard at the university. While UC Davis has areas for organic vegetable and row crop production, this will be its first organic orchard.